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Serious fun



A person wearing a blue jumpsuit and a belt with a large, ornate buckle is working with a welding torch. They are holding a piece of metal that is being shaped into a curved form. A large, industrial metal vise is visible in the background, clamping a piece of metal. The scene is set in a workshop or junkyard environment.

'Captain Critter' assembles junkyard salvage into fanciful sculptures

By Debbie Stringer

It's OK to laugh at Harry Holt's artwork. Fact is, that's the reaction he expects from onlookers.

Holt's expressive metal "critters" always turn heads and tickle funny bones at craft shows. Some are recognizable animals—a dog, a snake or a bird. But most are sheer fantasy, the product of Holt's limitless imagination. It's up to the viewer to put a name to them.

"What I really like is to go to a show and watch the people laugh. That was my intention to begin with," said Holt, aka "Captain Critter."

People enjoy the game of identifying not only the critters' species but their myriad components: cast-off farm and garden implements, automotive parts, tools and hardware.

"I use the very best the junkyard has," Holt said.

In Holt's hands, automotive rocker arms become feet or beaks; telephone bells are protruding eyes; valve springs mimic kinky hair; and hinges flap like wings.

Some of his parts are hard-to-find



Holt's creations include (clockwise from far left) a segmented snake; a floppy-eared dog; a bird coming unhinged; a shy rooster and a pair of masked door knockers. Materials include automotive rocker arms, shovel handles and blades, a tractor seat, farm implement parts, chain links and telephone bells.

*"I'm either an idiot
or a genius."*

—Harry Holt



antiques, such as the 100-year-old garden tiller with tines ending in leaf-shaped tips. Holt has used a few for critter tails and tongues. "I use them very sparingly."

A member of Central Electric Power Association, Holt and his wife Roberta live near the Little Rock community in Newton County, where he grew up. She teaches accounting at East Central Community College (ECCC).

His workplace is his home shop, filled to overflowing with tools, parts, projects and machinery, including a late-1800s industrial lathe and an antique 36-inch band saw.

"I've made things—or tried to—ever since I could crawl," Holt said.

He took classes in welding and electronics at ECCC. Through the years he's made a living repairing audiovisual equipment and TVs, sandblasting, painting, building custom production machinery and repairing mechanical equipment.

Holt describes himself, however, as a "master tinkerer." His projects range from a wheelchair lift to a lawn mower fashioned from an airport tug. He's turning a brass cannon on the metal lathe and building a 28-foot aluminum houseboat.

His interest in "crittering" was inspired about nine years ago when he and his wife saw a mall store display of creatures made from shovel parts and rebar.

"She thought they were cute, but I thought I could do better than that. They didn't look like they were ever alive," Holt recalled.

Holt envisioned assembling critters from found metal objects chosen for their resemblance to actual (and fanciful) body parts. Scouring junkyards for objects with critter potential, he collected bearings, wrenches, telephone bells, springs, plow parts, angle iron, shovels, valve springs, pitch forks and countless other items.

Six months later he began combining various parts and pieces until critters began emerging.

"I came home from school and he said, 'Well, I'm either an idiot or a genius. Come see what I've made,'" said Ms. Holt.

Spurred on, Holt's output soon overran the couple's front porch. "We got to where we had critters everywhere, and several of [our friends] said we needed to take them to a show," Holt said.

Friends also encouraged him to apply for membership in the Craftsmen's Guild of Mississippi. Nearly five years ago he was juried into the prestigious organization as a metal sculptor.

Holt's construction process is straightforward: he sandblasts selected parts, welds or brazes them together, sandblasts the finished piece then gives it a clear coat for protection. He does not paint them, preferring instead the intrinsic colors of the metal.

"I do shape some of my pieces but nine times out of 10 I select pieces that work with each other, complement each other," Holt explained.

He spends more time thinking about



critters than actually making them. "I like coming up with new stuff. But new stuff takes time," he added.

Holt wants to "get more serious about crittering." It's creative, enjoyable work that just happens to pay money.

"I have no idea where this comes from. Hence, I do believe it is a gift from the Lord," he said. "It has to be something that was given to me. And I do not intend to waste it."

Harry Holt will demonstrate and display his work Sept. 17 at Chimneyville Gallery, in the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum in Jackson. For pricing and other information, visit his Web site, www.captaincritter.com, or call 601-774-5597. ■